

The Open Pitt



What's cooking in Linux and Open Source in Western Pennsylvania

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From the Editor: Lawyers, GNUs, and Money

Technical types often seem to harbor a mistrust of lawyers, particularly in the arena of Free and Open Source software. The irony is that perhaps we have fewer legal issues to worry about than we may think.

The SCO lawsuit against IBM continues to grind on. There is thorough coverage of the relevant details at <http://groklaw.net/>, but the short version is that each time SCO has been asked to show specific evidence of their code being improperly copied into Linux, they have come up empty-handed. Despite making public statements about clear evidence of misappropriation and being given mountains of code by IBM for inspection and comparison, SCO's case keeps getting narrower and narrower. It appears unlikely to succeed on any of its grounds, much less reveal any legal danger to Linux.

In another case, Daniel Wallace's attempt to sue IBM, Red Hat, and Novell was thrown out of court. He made the somewhat creative argument that the GNU General Public License was illegal price-fixing under antitrust law, since anyone writing a competing piece of proprietary software would be working against a program that can be obtained at zero cost. The appellate court's ruling bluntly concludes with the sentence "The GPL and open-source software have nothing to fear from the antitrust laws."

Well even if the GPL isn't illegal, is it enforceable? Linux kernel developer Harald Welte, who exposes misuses of code under the GPL at <http://gpl-violations.org/>, won a judgment in Frankfurt district court. D-Link used the Linux kernel incorporating his netfilter code in a

network-attached storage device but failed to fulfill the conditions of the GPL. Although he and D-Link reached a partial settlement, the company subsequently refused to pay damages, claiming that the GPL was invalid. The court awarded damages to Welte, firmly establishing the legal validity of the GPL, at least in Germany.

To date, there seem to be no successful legal claims of copyright or patent infringement against Free and Open Source software projects. A major reason for this is likely that such projects don't *want* to misuse someone else's code. And even if they did, the open nature of the software would make it quite simple to obtain evidence of wrongdoing. By contrast, the opaque nature of most proprietary software makes discovering infringement much more difficult.

But it can't all be good news. The patent agreement between Microsoft and Novell has generated considerable excitement in the community. While Novell claims the deal isn't a statement that Linux infringes on Microsoft patents, Microsoft executives continue to make dark hints, without actually giving any specifics about violations (sound familiar?).

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January Roundup

Jan. 13 General User Meeting: The lowly text editor is one of the most basic tools in computing (especially programming), and this meeting was dedicated to showing off three of them.

Patrick Wagstrom was first up to demonstrate Emacs, an editor whose major claim to fame is the lengths to which it can be (and has been) extended. He spoke about Emacs modes, which cause the editor to highlight text and behave appropriately depending on the type of file being edited. Particularly useful for programmers is Emacs' ability to show and navigate through the functional structure of code. Also on display was its powerful search mechanism. And what Emacs presentation would be complete without playing a game of Tetris within the editor?

Next on display was Vi, the tradi-

tional rival to Emacs. **Brian Seklecki** described its origins in ed, the prehistoric editor used in the earliest versions of UNIX. He demonstrated Vim, a modern descendant common on Linux systems. Brian first explained some basic survival skills such as moving around within a file, saving it to disk, and exiting the editor. He then covered commands for editing and inserting text, finishing with a reference to Vimtutor for those seeking to learn more.

Unlike the previous two, jEdit was designed from the ground up as an editor with a graphical user interface. **Logan Stack** demonstrated its powerful yet user-friendly features such as intelligent syntax highlighting, code folding, bracket matching, and navigation aids. He showed off some of the plugins which have been created to extend jEdit's basic functionality.

Coming Events

Mar. 10: General User Meeting, Topic: How Do I Do That?—Linux Counterparts of Popular Windows Applications. (Time and location TBA, see web site for details)

Apr. 14: General User Meeting. (Time and location TBA, see web site for details)

The public is welcome at all events

LAWYERS, from p. 1

After the Novell-Microsoft end run around the strong anti-patent provisions of version 2 of the GPL, the Free Software Foundation and Software Freedom Law Center are looking to reinforce these in version 3. At this point, however, it's not entirely certain whether they will be able to do so neatly.

Outside events may end up having a greater influence on the situation. Alcatel has just prevailed in a patent lawsuit with Microsoft, to the tune of \$1.52 billion (yes, with a "b"). The patent, which Alcatel picked up when it acquired Lucent Technologies, relates to the MP3 audio format. Microsoft maintains that it licensed the necessary rights from the Fraunhofer Institute, the original developer of the format, but Alcatel successfully argued that their patent claims weren't covered by that license.

So it's clear that no one is truly safe from software patent claims. Giant Microsoft, with its massive resources and army of lawyers, made the determination that its software did not infringe—and was wrong (at least for

now; there's always the possibility of an appeal).

Of course, the Free and Open Source software community has recognized the danger of software patents for quite a long time now <<http://www.gnu.org/philosophy/fighting-software-patents.html>>, and has made considerable efforts to work around the problem. For example, the patent-free PNG image format was developed in response to Unisys' claims relating to GIF, and the <<http://www.xiph.org/>> project's Ogg Vorbis is an unencumbered alternative to MP3.

It will be instructive to observe how the industry reacts to the Alcatel-Microsoft decision. Many technology companies—including some regarded as being Open Source-friendly—still back the current software patent system. Instead of keeping themselves at the mercy of rights holders with formats like MP3, will we start to see broader adoption of Ogg Vorbis and other patent-free technologies? If so, perhaps they will come to enjoy the friendlier (and less expensive) legal climate on this side of the fence and decide to become part of the solution.

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<<http://www.wplug.org/top/>>

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What is Linux?

Linux is a *kernel*, the core of a computer operating system, created by Linus Torvalds. It is typically packaged as a *distribution*, which includes the extra programs necessary to make a computer functional and useful. Since 1991, it has grown from a one-man project which ran on one computer to one with thousands of contributors running on everything from personal organizers to million-dollar supercomputers.

What are Open Source and Free Software?

Open Source and Free Software provide you, the user, with the opportunity to see the source code of the programs you use. You are free to use it, share it with others, and even make changes to it if you wish. While the Free Software and Open Source communities differ in their philosophical approach, in practical terms they share nearly identical goals. Learn more at <<http://www.opensource.org/>> and <<http://www.gnu.org/>>.

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Spring Forward, Fall Back

It may not be as large of a problem as the Y2K transition, but there is an important date-related change happening this year. The effective dates for daylight saving time have been changed in the United States and some other

```
$ /usr/sbin/zdump -v -c 2008 /etc/localtime | grep 2007
/etc/localtime Sun Apr 1 06:59:59 2007 UTC = Sun Apr 1 01:59:59 2007 EST isdst=0 gmtoff=-18000
/etc/localtime Sun Apr 1 07:00:00 2007 UTC = Sun Apr 1 03:00:00 2007 EDT isdst=1 gmtoff=-14400
/etc/localtime Sun Oct 28 05:59:59 2007 UTC = Sun Oct 28 01:59:59 2007 EDT isdst=1 gmtoff=-14400
/etc/localtime Sun Oct 28 06:00:00 2007 UTC = Sun Oct 28 01:00:00 2007 EST isdst=0 gmtoff=-18000
```

If you see April 1 and October 28 as in the above example, your time zone files need to be fixed. This is usually done by installing a package named *tzdata* or *timezone* using your distribution's update mechanism. It is likely that you'll need to run an additional command to copy the appropriate file from the `/usr/share/zoneinfo/` directory to `/etc/localtime`. Check your distribution's

```
$ /usr/sbin/zdump -v -c 2008 /etc/localtime | grep 2007
/etc/localtime Sun Mar 11 06:59:59 2007 UTC = Sun Mar 11 01:59:59 2007 EST isdst=0 gmtoff=-18000
/etc/localtime Sun Mar 11 07:00:00 2007 UTC = Sun Mar 11 03:00:00 2007 EDT isdst=1 gmtoff=-14400
/etc/localtime Sun Nov 4 05:59:59 2007 UTC = Sun Nov 4 01:59:59 2007 EDT isdst=1 gmtoff=-14400
/etc/localtime Sun Nov 4 06:00:00 2007 UTC = Sun Nov 4 01:00:00 2007 EST isdst=0 gmtoff=-18000
```

Failing to update your timezone files will cause programs that use or display local time, such as *cron*, to be off by an hour for three weeks in the spring and one week in the fall. Using the network time protocol to synchronize your

locations. If the Linux distribution you're running is a few years old, it might not have the right dates. You can check whether your system is correct using the following command (results are for the U.S. Eastern time zone):

web site for full details on this, although running its administrative tool for choosing the local time zone ought to do the trick. Since many daemons only check the time zone on startup, you should either stop and restart them or simply reboot your machine. The right changeover dates for the U.S. are March 11 and November 4; if you see the following, your system is OK:

clock will not solve the problem as it uses universal time (UTC) and has no concept of daylight saving time. Also note that some programs like Evolution and Java have their own time zone files that must be updated separately.